

# Transcript of President Bush's Ohio speech

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**CLEVELAND, Ohio (AP) -- President Bush delivered a high-profile speech about the war in Iraq on Monday, on the third anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion there.**

Following is a transcript of the president's address in Cleveland, Ohio.

**BUSH:** Thank you all. Thank you all. Please be seated.

Sanjiv, thanks for the introduction.

He called me on the phone and said, "Listen, we believe in free speech, so you're going to come and give us a speech for free."

Thanks for the invitation. Thanks for the warm welcome. It's good to be here at the City Club of Cleveland.

For almost a century, you have provided an important forum for debate and discussion on the issues of the day. And I have come to discuss a vital issue of the day, which is the safety and security of every American and our need to achieve victory in the war on terror.

I want to thank the mayor for joining us.

Mr. Mayor, appreciate you being here.

It must make you feel pretty good to get the most livable city award.

I want to thank all the members of the City Club for graciously inviting me to come.

I want to thank the students who are here. Thanks for your interest in your government.

I look forward to giving you a speech and then answering questions, if you have any.

The central front on the war on terror is Iraq. And in the past few weeks, we've seen horrific images coming out of that country.

We've seen a great house of worship, the Golden Mosque of Samarra, in ruins after a brutal terrorist attack.

We have seen reprisal attacks by armed militia on Sunni mosques.

We have seen car bombs take the lives of shoppers in a crowded market in Sadr City.

We've seen the bodies of scores of Iraqi men brutally executed or beaten to death.

The enemies of a free Iraq attacked the Golden Mosque for a reason. They know they lack the military strength to challenge Iraqi and coalition forces in a direct battle, so they're trying to provoke a civil war.

By attacking one of Shia Islam's holiest sites, they hoped to incite violence that would drive Iraqis apart and stop their progress on the path to a free society.

The timing of the attack in Samarra is no accident. It comes at a moment when Iraq's elected leaders are working to form a unity government.

Last December, four short months ago, more than 11 million people expressed their opinion. They said loud and clear at the ballot box that they desire a future of freedom and unity.

And now it is time for the leaders to put aside their differences, reach out across political, religious and sectarian lines, and form a unity government that will earn the trust and confidence of all Iraqis.

My administration, led by Ambassador Zal Khalilzad, is helping and will continue to help the Iraqis achieve this goal.

The situation on the ground remains tense. In the face of continued reports about killings and reprisals, I understand how some Americans have had their confidence shaken.

Others look at the violence they see each night on their television screens and they wonder how I can remain so optimistic about the prospects of success in Iraq. They wonder what I see that they don't.

## **Tal Afar**

So today I'd like to share a concrete example of progress in Iraq that most Americans do not see every day in their newspapers or on their television screens. I'm going to tell you the story of a northern Iraqi city called Tal Afar, which was once a key base of operations for al Qaeda and is today a free city that gives reason for hope for a free Iraq.

Tal Afar is a city of more than 200,000 residents, roughly the population of Akron, Ohio. In many ways Tal Afar is a microcosm of Iraq. It has dozens of tribes of different ethnicity and religion. Most of the city residents are Sunnis of Turkoman origin.

Tal Afar sits just 35 miles from the Syrian border. It was a strategic location for al Qaeda and their leader, [Abu Musab al-Zarqawi].

Now, it's important to remember what al Qaeda has told us -- their stated objectives. Their goal is to drive us out of Iraq so they can take the country over. Their goal is to overthrow moderate Muslim governments throughout the region. Their goal is to use Iraq as a base from which to launch attacks against America.

To achieve this goal, they're recruiting terrorists from the Middle East to come into Iraq, to infiltrate its cities, and to sow violence and destruction, so that no legitimate government can exercise control.

And Tal Afar was a key way station for their operations in Iraq. After we removed Saddam Hussein in April 2003, the terrorists began moving into the city. They sought to divide Tal Afar's many ethnic and religious groups and forged an alliance of convenience with those who benefited from Saddam's regime and others with their own grievances.

They skillfully used propaganda to foment hostility toward the coalition and the new Iraqi government. They exploited a weak economy to recruit young men to their cause. And by September 2004, the terrorists and insurgents had basically seized control of Tal Afar.

We recognized the situation was unacceptable so we launched a military operation against them.

After three days of heavy fighting, the terrorists and the insurgents fled the city. Our strategy at the time was to stay after the terrorists and keep them on the run. So coalition forces kept moving, kept pursuing the enemy and rooting out the terrorists in other parts of Iraq.

Unfortunately, in 2004, the local security forces there in Tal Afar weren't able to maintain order, and so the terrorists and the insurgents eventually moved back into the town.

Because the terrorists threatened to murder the families of Tal Afar's police, its members rarely ventured out from the headquarters in an old Ottoman fortress.

The terrorists also took over local mosques, forcing local imams out and insisting that the terrorist message of hatred and intolerance and violence be spread from the mosques.

The same happened in Tal Afar schools, where the terrorists eliminated real education and instead indoctrinated young men in their hateful ideology.

By November of 2004, two months after our operation to clear the city, the terrorists had returned to continue their brutal campaign of intimidation.

The return of al Qaeda meant the innocent civilians in Tal Afar were in a difficult position.

Just put yourself in the shoes of the citizens of Tal Afar as all this was happening.

On the one side, you hear the coalition and Iraqi forces saying they're coming to protect you. But they'd already come in once and they had not stopped the terrorists from coming back. You worry that when the coalition goes after the terrorists, you or your family may be caught in the crossfire and your city might be destroyed. You don't trust the police. You badly want to believe the coalition forces really can help you out, but three decades of Saddam's brutal rule have taught you a lesson: Don't stick your neck out for anybody.

On the other side you see the terrorists and the insurgents. You know they mean business. They control the only hospital in town. You see that the mayor and other political figures are collaborating with the terrorists. You see how the people who work as interpreters for the coalition forces are beheaded. You see a popular city councilman gunned down in front of his horrified wife and children. You see a respected sheik and an imam kidnapped and murdered. You see the terrorists deliberately firing mortars into playgrounds and soccer fields filled with children. You see communities becoming armed enclaves. If you're in a part of Tal Afar that was not considered friendly, you see that the terrorists cut off your basic services like electricity and water.

You and your family feel besieged and you see no way out.

The savagery of the terrorists and insurgents who controlled Tal Afar is really hard for Americans to imagine. They enforced their rule through fear and intimidation, and women and children were not spared.

In one grim incident, the terrorists kidnapped a young boy from the hospital and killed him, and then they boobytrapped his body and placed him along the road where his family would see him. And when the boy's father came to retrieve his son's body, he was blown up.

These weren't random acts of violence. These were deliberate and highly organized attempts to maintain control through intimidation.

In Tal Afar, the terrorists had schools for kidnapping and beheading and laying [improvised explosive devices]. And they sent a clear message to the citizens of the city: Anyone who dares oppose their reign of terror will be murdered.

As they enforced their rule by targeting civilians, they also preyed upon adolescents craving affirmation.

Our troops found one Iraqi teenager who was taken from his family by the terrorists. The terrorists routinely abused him and violated his dignity. The terrorists offered him a chance to prove his manhood by holding the legs of captives as they were beheaded.

When our forces interviewed this boy, he told them that his greatest aspiration was to be promoted to the killer who would behead the bound captives.

Al Qaeda's idea of manhood may be fanatical and perverse, but it serves two clear purposes: It helped provide recruits willing to commit any atrocity and it enforced the rule of fear.

The result of this barbarity was a city where normal life had virtually ceased.

Colonel H.R. McMaster of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment described it this way: "When you come into a place in the grip of al Qaeda, you see a ghost town. There are no children playing in the streets. Shops are closed and bordered. all construction is stopped. People stay inside, prisoners in their own homes."

This is the brutal reality that al Qaeda wishes to impose on all the people of Iraq.

The ability of al Qaeda and its associate and its associates to retake Tal Afar was an example of something we saw elsewhere in Iraq. We recognized the problem and we changed our strategy.

Instead of coming in and removing the terrorists and then moving on, the Iraqi government and the coalition adopted a new approach called clear, hold and build. This new approach was made possible because of the significant gains made in training large numbers of highly capable Iraqi security forces.

Under this new approach, Iraqi and coalition forces would clear a city of the terrorists, leave well-trained Iraqi units behind to hold the city, and work with local leaders to build the economic and political infrastructure Iraqis need to live in freedom.

One of the first tests of this new approach was Tal Afar. In May, 2005, Colonel McMasters' unit was given responsibility for the western part of Nineveh province, where Tal Afar is located. And two months later, Iraq's national government announced a major offensive to clear the city of terrorists would soon be launched.

Iraqi and coalition forces first met with tribal leaders and local residents to listen to their grievances. One of the biggest complaints was the police force, which rarely ventured out of its headquarters. When it did venture, it was mostly to carry out sectarian reprisals.

And so the national government sent out new leaders to head the force. The new leaders set about getting rid of the bad elements and building a professional police force that all sides could have confidence in.

We recognized it was important to listen to the representatives of Tal Afar's many ethnic and religious groups.

It's an important part of helping to remove one of the leading sources of mistrust.

Next, Iraqi and army coalition forces spent weeks preparing for what they knew would be a tough military offensive.

They built an eight-foot high, 12-mile long dirt wall that ringed the city. This wall was designed to cut off any escape for terrorists trying to evade security checkpoints.

Iraqi and coalition forces also built temporary housing outside the city so that Tal Afar's people would have places to go when the fighting started.

Before the assault on the city, Iraqi and coalition forces initiated a series of operations in surrounding towns to eliminate safe havens and make it harder for fleeing terrorists to hide.

These steps took time. But as life returned to the outlying towns, these operations helped persuade the population of Tal Afar that Iraqi and coalition forces were on their side against a common enemy, the extremists who had taken control of their city and their lives.

Only after all these steps did Iraqi and coalition authorities launch Operation Restoring Rights to clear the city of the terrorists.

Iraqi forces took the lead. The primary force was 10 Iraqi battalions backed by three coalition battalions.

Many Iraqi units conducted their own anti-terrorist operations and controlled their own battlespace, hunting for the enemy fighters and securing neighborhoods block by block.

Throughout the operation, Iraqi and coalition forces were careful to hold their fire to let civilians pass safely out of the city.

By focusing on securing the safety of Tal Afar's population, the Iraqi and coalition forces began to win the trust of the city's residents which is critical to defeating the terrorists who are hiding among them.

After about two weeks of intense activity, coalition and Iraqi forces had killed about 150 terrorists and captured 850 more.

The operation uncovered weapons caches loaded with small arms ammunition and ski masks, RPG rockets, grenades, machine-gun ammunition and fuses and batteries for making [improvised explosive devices].

In one cache, we found an axe inscribed with the names of the victims the terrorists had beheaded.

And the operation accomplished all this while protecting innocent civilians and inflicting minimal damage on the city.

After the main combat operations were over, Iraqi forces moved in to hold the city. Iraqis' government deployed more than 1,000 Iraqi army soldiers and emergency police to keep order. And they were supported by a newly restored police force that would eventually grow to about 1,700 officers.

As part of the new strategy, we embedded coalition forces with the Iraqi police and with the army units patrolling Tal Afar to work with their Iraqi counterparts and to help them become more capable and professional.

In the weeks and months that followed, the Iraqi police built stations throughout Tal Afar, and city residents began stepping forward to offer testimony against captured terrorists and inform soldiers about where the remaining terrorists were hiding.

Inside the old Ottoman fortress, a joint coordination center manned by Iraqi army and police and coalition forces answers the many phone calls that now come in through a new tip line. As a result of the tips, when someone tries to plant an [improvised explosive device] in Tal Afar, it's often reported and disabled before it can do any harm.

The Iraqi forces patrolling the cities are effective, because they know the people, they know the language and they know the culture. And by turning control of these cities over to capable Iraqi troops and police, we give Iraqis confidence that they can determine their own destiny, and that frees up coalition forces to hunt high-value targets like Zarqawi.

The recent elections show us how Iraqis respond when they know they are safe. Tal Afar is the largest city in western Nineveh province. In the elections held in January 2005, of about 190,000 registered voters, only 32,000 people went to the polls. Only Falluja had a lower participation rate.

By the time of the October referendum on the constitution and the December elections, Iraqi and coalition forces had secured Tal Afar and surrounding areas. The number of registered voters rose to about 204,000 and more than 175,000 turned out to vote in each election, more than 85 percent of the eligible voters in western Nineveh province.

It came only after much trial and error. It took time to understand and adjust to the brutality of the enemy in Iraq.

Yet the strategy is working. And we know it's working because the people of Tal Afar are showing their gratitude for the good work that Americans have given on their behalf.

A recent television report followed a guy named Captain Jesse Sellers on patrol and described him as a pied piper with crowds of Iraqi children happily chanting his name as he greets locals with the words "Salam alaikum" which means, "Peace be with you."

When the newswoman asked a local merchant what would have happened a few months earlier if he'd have been seen talking with an American, his answer was clear: "They would have cut off my head; they would have beheaded me."

Like thousands of others in Tal Afar, this man knows the true meaning of liberation.

Recently, Senator Joe Biden said that America cannot want peace for Iraqis more than they want it for themselves. I agree with that. And the story of Tal Afar shows that when Iraqis can count on a basic level of safety and security, they can live together peacefully.

We saw this in Tal Afar after the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra.

Unlike other parts of Iraq, in Tal Afar, the reaction was subdued, with few reports of sectarian violence. Actually, on the Friday after the attack, more than 1,000 demonstrators gathered in Tal Afar to protest the attack peacefully.

The terrorists have not given up in Tal Afar. And they may yet succeed in exploding bombs or provoking acts of sectarian violence.

The people of the city still have many challenges to overcome, including old-age [sic] resentments that still create suspicion, an economy that needs to create jobs and opportunity for its young, and determined enemies who will continue trying to foment a civil war to move back in.

But the people of Tal Afar have shown why spreading liberty and democracy is at the heart of our strategy to defeat the terrorists.

The people of Tal Afar have shown that Iraqis do want peace and freedom. And no one should underestimate them.

**'Savage acts of violence'**

I wish I could tell you that the progress made in Tal Afar is the same in every single part of Iraq. It's not. Though most of the country has remained relatively peaceful, in some parts of Iraq the enemy is carrying out savage acts of violence, particularly in Baghdad and the surrounding areas of Baghdad.

But the progress made in bringing more Iraqi security forces on-line is helping to bring peace and stability to Iraqi cities. The example of Tal Afar gives me confidence in our strategy because in this city we see the outlines of the Iraq that we and the Iraqi people have been fighting for. A free and secure people who are getting back on their feet, who are participating in government and civic life, and who have become allies in the fight against the terrorists.

I believe that as Iraqis continue to see the benefits of liberty, they will gain confidence in their future and they will work to ensure that common purpose trumps narrow sectarianism.

And by standing with them in their hour of need we're going to help the Iraqis build a strong democracy that will be an inspiration throughout the Middle East, a democracy that'll be a partner in the global war against the terrorists.

The kind of progress that we and the Iraqi people are making in places like Tal Afar is not easy to capture in a short clip on the evening news. Footage of children playing or shops opening and people resuming their normal lives will never be as dramatic as the footage of an [improvised explosive device] explosion or the destruction of a mosque or soldiers and civilians being killed or injured.

The enemy understands this, and it explains their continued acts of violence in Iraq.

Yet the progress we and the Iraqi people are making is also real, and those in a position to know best are the Iraqis themselves.

### **The mayor of Tal Afar**

One of the most eloquent is the mayor of Tal Afar, a courageous Iraqi man named Najin. Mayor Najin arrived in the city in the midst of the al Qaeda occupation, and he knows exactly what our troops have helped accomplish.

He calls our men and women in uniform "lionhearts." And in a letter to the troopers of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, he spoke of a friendship sealed in blood and sacrifice.

As Mayor Najin had this to say to the families of our fallen: "To the families of those who have given their holy blood for our land, we all bow to you in reverence and to the souls of your loved ones. Their sacrifice was not in vain. They are not dead but alive, and their souls are hovering around us every second of every minute. They will not be forgotten for giving their precious lives. They have sacrificed that which is most valuable. We see them in the smile of every child and in every flower growing in this land.

"Let America, their families and the world be proud of their sacrifice for humanity and life."

America is proud of that sacrifice and we are proud to have allies like Mayor Najin on our side in the fight for freedom.

Yesterday we marked the third anniversary of the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. At this time there's much discussion in our country about the removal of Saddam Hussein from power and our remaining mission in Iraq.

The decision to remove Saddam Hussein was a difficult decision. The decision to remove Saddam Hussein was the right decision.

Before we acted, his regime was defying U.N. resolutions calling for it to disarm. It was violating cease-fire agreements, was firing on American and British pilots which were enforcing no-fly zones.

Saddam Hussein was a leader who brutalized his people, had pursued and used weapons of mass destruction and sponsored terrorism.

Today, Saddam Hussein is no longer oppressing his people or threatening the world. He's being tried for his crimes by the free citizens of a free Iraq, and America and our allies are safer for it.

### **'We're adapting our approach'**

The last three years have tested our resolve. The fighting has been tough. The enemy we face has proved to be brutal and relentless. We're adapting our approach to reflect the hard realities on the ground. And the sacrifices being made by our young men and women who wear our uniform has been heartening and inspiring.

The terrorists who are setting off bombs in mosques and markets in Iraq share the same hateful ideology as the terrorists who attacked us on September the 11, 2001, those who blew up the commuters in London and Madrid, and those who murdered tourists in Bali or workers in Riyadh or guests at a wedding in Amman.

In the war on terror, we face a global enemy. And if we were not fighting this enemy in Iraq, they would not be idle. They would be plotting and trying to kill Americans across the world and within our own borders.

Against this enemy there can be no compromise. So we will fight them in Iraq, we will fight them across the world, and we will stay in the fight until the fight is won.

In the long run, the best way to defeat this enemy and to assure the security of our own citizens is to spread the hope of freedom across the broader Middle East. We've seen freedom conquer evil and secure the peace before.

In World War II, free nations came together to fight the ideology of fascism, and freedom prevailed. And today Germany and Japan are democracies, and they are allies in securing the peace.

In the Cold War, freedom defeated the ideology of communism and led to a democratic movement that freed the nations of Central and Eastern Europe from Soviet domination. And today these nations are strong allies in the war on terror.

In the Middle East, freedom is once again contending with an ideology that seeks to sow anger and hatred and despair. And like fascism and communism before, the hateful ideologies that use terror will be defeated.

Freedom will prevail in Iraq. Freedom will prevail in the Middle East.

And as the hope of freedom spreads to nations that have not known it, these countries will become allies in the cause of peace.

The security of our country is directly linked to the liberty of the Iraqi people, and we will settle for nothing less than victory.

Victory will come when the terrorists and Saddamists can no longer threaten Iraq's democracy, when the Iraqi security forces can provide for the safety of their citizens on their own, and when Iraq is not a safe haven for terrorists to plot new attacks against our nation.

There will be more days of sacrifice and tough fighting before the victory is achieved. Yet by helping the Iraqis defeat the terrorists in their land, we bring greater security to our own.

As we make progress toward victory, Iraqis will continue to take more responsibility for their own security and fewer U.S. forces will be needed to complete the mission.



But it's important for the Iraqis to hear this: The United States will not abandon Iraq. We will not leave that country to the terrorists who attacked America and want to attack us again. We will leave Iraq, but when we do, it will be from a position of strength, not weakness.

Americans have never retreated in the face of thugs and assassins, and we will not begin now.

Thanks for listening.